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AUTHOR Sadler, Jackie
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ABSTRACT

Ways of improving the quality of precourse information, advice, and guidance available to students entering further education and sixth form colleges in the United Kingdom were explored. Data were collected from the following sources: (1) the 3-year Raising Quality and Achievement Programme; (2) seminars on sharing good practice in delivering student support; (3) 171 institutions' responses to a survey on pre-entry guidance and admissions; and (4) analysis of the findings from 86 college inspection reports. The following were among the 10 recommendations for placing applicants more appropriately: (1) use feedback from those applying to the institutions; (2) explore any effects of pre-entry information, advice, and guidance on retention and achievement; (3) liaise with schools and the Connexions service to clarify the nature and extent of career education and guidance received by pupils; (4) identify the information needs of parents and guardians within the college catchment area and development appropriate ways of meeting them; (5) explore ways of increasing access to advice and guidance at times of greatest need; and (6) develop self-assessment tools to enable prospective students to identify the most appropriate program and level. A table listing tensions and conflicts of pre-enrollment services is appended. (Contains 14 references.) (MN)

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LSDA reports

Making the best match

Improving the quality of pre-course information, advice and guidance

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M J Nowicki

Jackie Sadler

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Feedback should be sent to:
Information Services
Learning and Skills Development Agency
Regent Arcade House, 19–25 Argyll Street
London W1F 7LS.
Tel 020 7297 9144
Fax 020 7297 9242
enquiries@LSDA.org.uk

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Further information

For further information on the issues discussed in this publication please contact:
Muriel Green, Development Adviser
Learning and Skills Development Agency
Robins Wood House, Robins Wood Road
Aspley, Nottingham NG8 3NH.
Tel 0115 929 9097
mgreen@LSDA.org.uk

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Summary

Research has indicated some weaknesses in pre-entry information, advice and guidance in the sector that are likely to result in applicants making the wrong choice of programme. These include:

- limited availability of one-to-one pre-entry guidance and specialist advice and assessment, particularly for part-time students
- bias or partiality in the information, advice and guidance given
- information lacking details that are crucial to correct decisions
- unclear information.

The research has also highlighted the importance to retention and achievement of students being placed on the right programme.

External influences also affect pre-entry information, advice and guidance. The requirement for colleges in Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) partnerships to be accredited against the Guidance Council's national quality standards by March 2001 has encouraged institutions to review their policies and procedures, particularly those relating to the pre-entry stage.

Widening participation has brought more non-learners into colleges – whether they are adults who have not studied since leaving school or disaffected 14–16 year olds looking for work-related learning. Curriculum changes require that both applicants and their parents (or guardians) are briefed on options available. The emphasis on disadvantaged young people (the focusing agenda) is reducing the number of pupils who receive one-to-one guidance in schools and so more young people are applying to colleges with unclear or unrealistic career goals. Colleges are responding by enhancing their initial IAG provision to ensure that applicants make the right choice. College approaches include:

- developing partnerships with schools and community and voluntary agencies and more targeted outreach
- enhancing the quality and consistency of course information, introducing templates for course information and developing new mechanisms for assessment, including self-assessment
- introducing applicants to a broader range of provision (eg through 'realistic' tasters, summer schools and information talks) rather than just interviewing for a specific programme
- modularising provision and offering an introductory module to confirm initial choices
- introducing screening of applications by central admissions and other specialist staff
- increasing opportunities for referral for impartial guidance
- ensuring increased consistency in interviewing (eg through improved training, briefing and monitoring)
- better briefing of parents on the curriculum, opportunities available and progression routes.

Introduction

This report describes how pre-enrolment information, advice and guidance (IAG) services have been changing to meet recent challenges, particularly to improve retention and achievement. It focuses on FE and sixth form colleges, and adult and community education provision; providing a snapshot of current practice in the post-16 sector and highlighting strengths and weaknesses.

It is written for guidance practitioners and specialists, tutors and lecturing staff, and support staff. It includes case studies of the ways in which colleges are enhancing their provision – including taking account of the perceptions of their students.

The introduction of the recurrent funding methodology has encouraged a focus on improving retention and achievement. National research and research undertaken in colleges has raised awareness of what staff can do to make a difference. The contribution of impartial information, advice and guidance to ensuring that students are on the right programme, remain on programme and achieve is becoming more widely recognised.

Much more clearly now the stated objective is that the intending student should be advised and guided towards appropriate choices, rather than simply recruited for their own sake.

City of Bath College

This report draws mainly on the following sources:

- 3 years of development work from LSDA's Raising Quality and Achievement (RQA) Programme, financed through the FE Standards Fund (England). The colleges involved have written up their case studies for the RQA website and about 160 can currently be downloaded
- seminars held by FEDA in 2000, on sharing good practice in the delivery of student support
- a survey on pre-entry guidance and admissions, undertaken in 2001 by LSDA on behalf of college representatives in the Student Guidance Network, to inform their development work (received responses from 171 institutions)
- an analysis of findings from 86 FEFC reports from the second inspection round (1998/2001), to identify which aspects of information, advice and guidance provision were commended or criticised. Student support was graded 1 in 42 reports and 3 or below in 44 reports.

Messages from research

The learners' checklist in *Managing the delivery of guidance in colleges* (FEU 1994) identified the information, advice and guidance needs students and potential students might have at each stage in the learner pathway. At the pre-entry / entry stage, these were:

- accessibility
- clear information
- advice on finance and costs
- impartial interview
- recognition of prior achievement.

The extent to which these needs are met will affect whether applicants identify an appropriate learning opportunity, are placed correctly and remain on course and achieve.

Students often decide not to complete their studies because the courses are not what they expected, or because they only wish to acquire certain skills or knowledge, rather than a qualification.

National Audit Office 2001

Retention and achievement

The 1994 FEU report *Tackling targets* considered links between retention and achievement and the quality of student support, particularly in relation to pre-entry processes. With reference to adults it concluded that:

- they would enrol if they got high-quality advice and guidance
- advice and guidance are best delivered in a specialist advice and guidance unit
- diagnostic assessment is essential for all non-standard entry students
- time must be allowed for discussion and induction at the start of programmes
- educational guidance must be comprehensive and constructed collaboratively to ensure impartiality and progression.

In relation to young people:

- school leavers are not fully aware of what courses are available at college or prepared to find out
- students can be motivated and committed but circumstances beyond their control may make them drop out
- students placed on inappropriate programmes are particularly likely to drop out
- two other important factors in drop out are obtaining a job and financial problems.

Since 1994 there has been more work into the contribution of pre-entry information, advice and guidance to retention and achievement, such as:

- national research like *9000 voices* (FEDA 1998)
- colleges' own studies into withdrawal and achievement
- national development projects undertaken by colleges in the RQA Programme.

Making appropriate choices

Pre-enrolment is characterised by the potentially conflicting interests of the applicant, the staff, the institution, and the parents (or guardians). There may be pressure to fill programmes or gain a place on the course that leads to a 'dream career'. Such tensions are comprehensively listed on page 23 of *Improving student achievement: a guide to successful strategies* (Martinez 1997) and included here as the appendix.

Several factors contribute towards inappropriate course choices, including those listed below.

One-to-one pre-entry guidance or more specialist advice is limited or only by request from the individual

This requires applicants to be aware that the service exists and that they need it. This is often particularly true for part-time students and for adults returning to learning after some years. They may have negative perceptions of education from initial schooling and little knowledge of realistic career options. Adult learners may need much more guidance than the 16–18 cohort.

Although nearly all institutions surveyed in 2001 offered pre-entry, one-to-one guidance interviews to young people on full-time programmes, only three-quarters offered them to part-time learners. For part-time learners guidance may only be available on request, through referral, or limited to specific programmes such as adult Access courses. The gap between the number of full-time and part-time students offered initial assessments or screening is even greater; with about half the colleges that offer assessment making it available to 16–19-year-old part-time students, compared with 16–19-year-old full-time students.

There is often pressure on admissions staff in September, and the availability of initial guidance at this time can be limited, especially for part-time students.

Martinez, Munday 1998

Inadequate information, advice and guidance

This would include, for example:

- non-specialist staff with inadequate in-depth knowledge of the programme (or inadequate briefing) interviewing for course placement
- the danger of biased or skewed advice, where it is only available from teaching staff, particularly those recruiting onto their own programmes.

Impartial pre-enrolment advice and guidance was frequently commended by FEFC inspectors.

Pre-enrolment information is not always comprehensive enough (it may leave out the full costs, the level of commitment needed or destination patterns). This can lead to a lack of awareness of the demands of a programme or its links to career goals (NAO 2001). Research carried out in 1999 (Callender 1999) indicated that over half the students questioned had not been given information on programme costs before they started their programmes.

[Students] *wanted information about course timetables, examples of the kind of work they would be expected to do, and an opportunity to talk to someone with a detailed knowledge of the course.*

Martinez, Munday 1998

Unrealistic ambitions

Learners (and / or their parents) may have unrealistic career ambitions or inaccurate ideas of their current abilities, and may be disinclined to take the advice of college staff:

A significant number of students coming to college as the result of parental pressure are poorly motivated, change their minds and eventually drop out.

Martinez, Munday 1998

Inappropriate curriculum offer

An inappropriate curriculum offer (eg a lack of Foundation-level programmes) that does not match learners' needs.

Changes affecting college guidance

A changing learner profile

Growth targets and the implementation of widening participation strategies have been changing the learner profile in recent years.

Competition for students

The increasingly competitive climate of the 1990s led to advice and guidance being seen at some institutions purely as part of the marketing function – a mechanism for increasing student enrolments – and in some cases this undermined the impartiality of the information and advice given.

Both the RQA case studies and the college representatives at seminars report frequent difficulty in gaining access to schools to make pupils aware of the range of provision they offered.

Relationships with feeder schools have been very variable with some of them actively seeking to discourage their students from considering the College as a post-16 option.

City of Bath College

Curriculum change

The introduction of Curriculum 2000 posed new challenges in ensuring that prospective students and their parents (or guardians) are adequately briefed about the range of courses available, the new vocational A-levels, the expectation that students will study more than three subjects and the extra work this will generate.

IAG partnerships

IAG partnerships were established in England in 1999 to develop local structures for the delivery of information, advice and guidance to adults, and have formalised partnership working among guidance agencies. Most of them maintain directories of local IAG providers, offering an opportunity for colleges to publicise their offer to adults.

The North London IAG Partnership directory of services and website will signpost potential students to the Progression Centre for advice on courses.

Southgate College

Implementing quality standards

Institutions have been developing quality frameworks and standards for their information, advice and guidance provision throughout the last decade (see Sadler, Reisenberger 1997). Wigston College, for example, focused on speed of response to enquiries, providing information and sending out offer letters.

However, the IAG partnerships and the Guidance Council's national quality standards have had a major impact on encouraging common approaches to the quality assurance of pre-entry provision for adult clients. Colleges that were members of the partnerships needed to achieve the quality mark from the Guidance Accreditation Board (GAB), against the national quality standards. This resulted in many institutions reviewing their IAG policies, procedures and practice. In some partnerships, college staff who are unqualified have also been given the chance to achieve relevant NVQs.

In line with college policy and procedure, and the Guidance Council quality standards, improved processes are to be put in place for self-assessment and review, compliments, comments and complaints, referrals, client feedback, mystery shopper, and additional service-specific staff appraisal.

Southgate College

To achieve the quality mark, colleges had to draft (or review) referral policies that specified how signposting and referral are handled by the provider, what is expected of staff and take account of relevant legislation. These policies should apply to both internal and external referral and underpin impartial approaches.

It led to a uniform service.
Now we do referrals in a more focused way.

Opie 2001

The standards are useful in a large organisation because they safeguard your impartiality and working practices.

Opie 2001

The national quality standards focus on the clients' experience and client satisfaction is therefore a significant indicator of success. Satisfaction is measured through both client feedback and 'mystery shoppers' – although the latter is not currently required for accreditation. Mystery shoppers are potential service users who are briefed in advance and give an objective account of whether quality standards are met. They can be very useful in the assessment of pre-entry and front-line services, since they ensure feedback on situations where clients make brief enquiries and may not actually enrol as learners.

Mystery shoppers have taught us a great deal about the parking arrangements and the content of our prospectus. Many amazing systems have been developed as a result of their feedback, which have influenced many other areas of the College.

Opie 2001

Initially, because of the focus of the IAG partnerships and the need to manage the task within the given time, institutions tended to concentrate on accreditation for their pre-entry services for adults. Where accreditation has been sought first for a particular team or service (eg outreach provision) the challenge is then to ensure coherent, comprehensive and appropriate policies and procedures for all learners from pre-entry to exit.

The impact of the 'focusing agenda'

The 'focusing agenda' for careers companies reflected government concern to increase support for those considered socially excluded. A speech by Kim Howells, Minister for Lifelong Learning, at a careers service conference in November 1997 indicated the implications this new policy approach might have for further education:

We want schools and colleges to take more responsibility for preparing pupils to take careers decisions. This will free up (careers) services to concentrate more on areas where they are most needed... For young people over the age of 16, we want services to concentrate on those who are not in education, training or employment.

This not only resulted in careers companies reviewing their delivery within schools and the FE sector, but also, more generally, the level of support they were able to give to young people who were high achievers. Careers services ceased to interview all students in schools. Prospective students who had not dropped out of the system and were not at risk of doing so were less likely to have individual guidance interviews with career specialists. In such cases, opportunities to develop career awareness depended more on the gravity and breadth of the careers education programmes in schools.

In a growing number of schools, young people who were performing well but were uncertain about what they wanted to do found it impossible to secure a careers interview.

Watts 2001

The introduction of Connexions partnerships

It is currently unclear what impact the new Connexions service is likely to have on the careers education and guidance provision available to prospective entrants to further education. Staff in both colleges and careers companies have expressed concern that those entering further education at 16, and particularly those applying for higher level programmes, may be less aware of the range of choices available to them and of opportunities for progression, than cohorts from previous years.

If personal advisers are based in schools, with a financial interest in retaining students into their sixth forms, the access to impartial information and advice enshrined in the 1997 Education Act may be seriously undermined.

If many Careers Advisers were to be replaced by Personal Advisers appointed and managed by headteachers, the extent of this access seemed likely to be severely reduced; and insofar as career guidance was in future to be offered by these Personal Advisers, the likelihood of overt or subtle pressures being placed on their impartiality was significantly enhanced.

Watts 2001

Pupils may be attracted to popular, better-known vocational courses through lack of knowledge about the range of options available (eg applicants to motor vehicle courses, who might be better suited to car sales) or specialist areas (eg roofing, within construction).

Introducing changes to pre-entry information, advice and guidance

Colleges are finding that to ensure that students are on the right programme, they need to consider changes to their IAG processes, such as:

- using more sophisticated screening approaches to check on levels of self and opportunity awareness
- introducing applicants to the range of programmes available in a vocational area and assisting them to narrow their options, rather than just interviewing for a particular course
- increasing the amount of one-to-one guidance available at the pre-entry stage
- vocational specialists from institutions working more closely with feeder schools, in liaison with the Connexions partnership, to increase awareness of career opportunities.

A number of changes have been made to the admissions process, based on this year's experience. Students will be invited into the College by vocational area (rather than by level of course) for their initial skills review. Heads of school will welcome the students to the College and provide an overview of all the courses offered within that vocational area, before the student has an admissions interview.

Leicester College 2001

Organising information, advice and guidance services

Results from the pre-entry guidance and admissions survey indicate that:

- nearly three-quarters (74%) of institutions have a central information and guidance centre
- approximately one fifth have an information and guidance centre on each site
- less than one tenth have no information and guidance centre.

Where institutions have only one main centre, IAG services may be provided by appointment, or through 'drop-in' at pre-determined times, at some or all other sites, or there may be smaller outlets at other centres. Information services are being provided to clients in a range of ways, including:

- learning shops in city centres
- call centres
- outreach
- a combination of peripatetic and central services.

Increasingly institutions are placing their information and advice centres in high-profile locations near the college entrance – often enabling potential customers, who may not be confident about entering a large, unfamiliar institution, to get help before they reach the main reception. One institution reported that it was providing outreach information and advice points within the IAG partnership.

Institutions identified the following as part of their pre-entry guidance service:

- information
- one-to-one guidance interviews
- initial assessment, including specialist assessments offered to students with disabilities, special educational needs and English as a second language, and for additional learning support
- screening (eg through references, schools contacts, *Searchlight*, for basic skills)
- group interviews
- talks and discussion groups in partner schools
- open days and evenings
- taster days
- college tours.

Where initial assessment and screening are provided on entry or at induction, some institutions are also considering introducing them into the pre-entry stage. The above services may not be available to or appropriate for everyone. For example, community education students on 'recreational' courses may not be screened or assessed.

There are also examples of institutions working proactively in their communities with other agencies delivering information and advice holistically to meet a range of needs. The IAG and Connexions partnerships may further encourage such developments.

Case study

Transition with schools is an inter-agency initiative begun in 1998 to help young people prepare for the transition from schools. Staff at Gateway College worked with representatives from agencies that offered information and advice to young people (eg the Careers Service, the Benefits Agency and the housing department). They came together to deliver workshops in schools to Year 11 pupils on a range of topics, such as coping with change and study skills. Pupils could attend two workshops and the programme was backed up with relevant materials (eg a list of the agencies offering assistance to young people). Schools have now incorporated this initiative into their PSE provision.

Improving information

Larger institutions, particularly those that are the result of mergers and operate on multiple sites with responsibilities devolved to faculties, may find it more difficult to ensure that their information and careers materials are of consistently high quality. Nearly all (87%) of the institutions that responded to the survey had cross-college information and guidance policies and it is clearly important that staff comply with the procedures resulting from such policies. There may alternatively be an information policy that covers the information centre and serves the whole institution but no common policy for the delivery of guidance by tutors or other staff.

Publicity

In the second round of FEFC inspections, clear, informative and comprehensive publicity was commended. It was also expected that there would be a range of customised information (eg with adaptations for students with severe learning difficulties and disabilities), which was widely available and well publicised.

Institutions with the national IAG quality mark are required to meet minimum standards for the marketing and promotion of their IAG services for adults but this may not extend to all their IAG provision nor cover course information.

Increased emphasis on attracting students into the sector in the 1990s led to some 'over-designed' prospectuses. Information needs to be clearly set out and readable. Inspectors frequently commended attractive and well-designed publicity.

Colleges are making increasing use of the achievements of current and former students in marketing their provision. For example, Richmond upon Thames College includes pen portraits of the successful students who came from local schools in its prospectus. A Grade 1 college with publicity celebrating student success was commended by the inspectorate.

Comprehensive course information

Information in prospectuses and course leaflets is not always comprehensive enough to enable prospective students to decide between programmes. For example, the following may be crucial, but in the past have been frequently omitted:

- full information on costs, including concessions
- whether a programme is part-time or full-time and the contact days
- number of guided hours
- start dates and length of programmes
- level of programme (not always obvious from the title)
- location or site of the programme
- mode of study
- progression routes
- adequate details of course content and any options or specialisms.

Inspectors frequently raised concerns at course leaflets lacking necessary information.

Case study

Wigston College handles 100–400 enquiries each week providing a wide range of information, which enables callers to browse. Publicity includes an indication of on-course and off-course commitments, and lists all relevant costs. A separate course directory is available for adults. A destinations booklet is circulated to schools, careers services, etc (with data from tutors plus a telephone survey). Pre-paid reply envelopes are included with all course leaflets and prospectuses.

'Course leaflets lacking important information' was one of the most frequently cited weaknesses of colleges with lower inspection grades. Many college staff (including support staff) may be approached for information about programmes or expected to assist at events where they may field enquiries. They need accurate, comprehensive and current course and contact details to help them give good advice and deal with initial enquiries effectively.

College action research projects to improve retention and achievement have uncovered some inadequacies in course information and colleges are addressing them.

Case study

Feedback from Leicester College's entry survey (1999/2000) indicated that:

- *27% of entrants, who had been interviewed for a course did not feel that they received enough information about the progression opportunities available on completion of their course*
- *22% of entrants were not given enough information about the requirements of the course and course costs*
- *16% of entrants did not feel that they had received enough information about the course content.*

To improve the quality of pre-course information, the College developed a 'course template' for each full-time course. The template provided:

- *a detailed description of the course content*
- *an explanation of the assessment process along with a calendar identifying when assessments would take place*
- *the type of delivery methods used in the course*
- *the skills the learners would need to develop to be successful on the course.*

The templates were used during admissions interviews and incorporated into course leaflets.

Admissions tutors felt that the templates were important in raising awareness of what the course entailed so that prospective learners could make an informed decision. The results of the entry survey for 2000/01 showed significant improvement in that only 18% did not feel they received enough information about course costs and course requirements and only 12% felt that they did not have sufficient information about course content.

Providing information online

Colleges reported that students are interested in online information and this provision is generally either available or under development. Increasing use of technology within institutions (and by some sectors of the general population) is facilitating access to course information, for example by downloading from college websites. This should also ensure greater currency, as course details can be updated more frequently. Colleges are placing their publicity materials on both their website and the college intranet for student access.

Information talks

Colleges have been introducing 'information talks' aimed at potential students and in some cases their parents or guardians. These may be delivered at the institution – or where colleges are allowed access – at feeder schools. They tend to cover the curriculum and support offered. Representatives from Solihull Sixth Form College, for example, attend careers evenings at partner schools and deliver subject talks for students, particularly on non-National Curriculum topics.

Case study

For 1998/9, the staff in the Department of Early Childhood at South Birmingham College changed their interviewing procedures after following up some students who had dropped out because the course was not what they had expected. Since most prospective students were applying for courses without understanding the range of provision on offer, the staff introduced information sessions covering entry requirements, course content, assessment methods, teaching methods and support available for personal and study purposes. These sessions gave applicants the chance to discuss the differences between the programmes and then book an individual interview before they left.

The system was still operating in 2001, with retention and achievement remaining high, and well above national benchmarks. The Department is now a Centre of Vocational Excellence (CoVE).

Enhancing information for adults and part-time learners

Part-time learners and adults generally have more limited access to guidance. Inspectors frequently commended institutions that were running open days or evenings and other events for adults and part-time students, and where part-time provision was well publicised.

Case study

In 2000, Bicton College of Agriculture surveyed a small sample of older, part-time learners, including both those who had left (six), and those who had stayed (18). Information on course content and schemes of work were considered important by respondents – and two of the three early leavers who gave a reason for their withdrawal, indicated lack of advice on course content. Four of the six considered that 'guidance in returning to studying – exam support, assignment writing, organisation, research etc' played an important part in the successful completion of a course. Ten of the 24 respondents considered that the extent to which advice and guidance had been made available to them was either poor or very poor – three of these had left.

In response it was recommended that 'computerised information be produced which is generic, unbiased, clear, detailed ... available to all academic and non-academic staff who may come into contact with enquiries from potential learners... and all information to be regularly checked and updated by the course manager'.

The content of information to be sent to potential customers was also to be specified and included full course details (syllabus topics, practical sessions and schemes of work); prior reading requirements and / or preparation; teaching methods; assessment methods; realistic ongoing costs; time implications for studying; career possibilities; and information on study skills workshops.

A further recommendation related to a 'requirement that all learners take part in a self-assessment exercise to ascertain suitability of the course level, teaching methods and levels of accreditation of prior learning'.

The course information in some adult learning prospectuses has become more detailed; for example including the syllabus of each course, day and times of the course, who the tutor is, progression routes and what to bring to the first lesson. Colleges are also developing self-assessment tools to support accurate course choice.

Making the correct choice of language course poses particular challenges for adults, who may be unsure of their level of proficiency – particularly where it has been acquired many years previously, or through informal learning.

Case study

Richmond Adult Community College produces syllabus forms for all its courses. These include details of level, course content, tutor, entry requirements, materials, assessment and progression. Advice sessions for language courses are offered in July and September: this gives students an opportunity to look at course materials, test their speaking and listening skills and compare different levels of classes. Self-assessment tests are available for some languages, and are supplemented by advice from course tutors.

If students wish to join a class during the year they can visit it before enrolling and language students can transfer to a different level of class without paying an administration fee.

Even institutions focusing mostly on full-time students may now produce a separate prospectus, course leaflets and / or handbook for adults.

Case study

Kendal College introduced a range of marketing initiatives to attract and inform part-time adult students:

- *a new adult course guide (rather than a part-time prospectus) enables adults to consider all routes and is supplemented by detailed course information sheets*
- *discounts are offered to existing students*
- *study buses visit rural villages*
- *publicity is distributed through free paper delivery*
- *curriculum staff have been asked to discuss course choice with part-time students whenever possible.*

Improving pre-enrolment advice and guidance

Characteristics of pre-enrolment advice and guidance most frequently commended by the Inspectorate were that they were:

- impartial: for further discussion of impartiality in colleges see *On course for next steps: careers education and guidance for students in FE* pages 23–28 (Sadler, Reisenberger 1997)
- effective at the point of enquiry
- suitably adapted and appropriate for adults
- valued by students who felt well informed
- focused on appropriate course choice
- promptly followed up.

Most institutions provide pre-entry guidance throughout the year, not just over the summer, for example through liaison events with partner schools. However, availability may be linked to enrolment sessions, or increase during the summer or autumn or at the beginning of term – and focus on the 16–19 cohorts. Institutions may also refer enquirers to careers service providers.

Nearly all survey respondents (95%) offered guidance interviews: some of them occupationally specific rather than a broader exploration of options. These are more likely to be offered by appointment than through drop in, but are often made available whenever the college is open, and not restricted to term time.

Survey results indicate that institutions are more likely to provide information about learning opportunities (nearly as many indicated that this would include opportunities outside the college), and the advice and support required for learning (eg on finance, childcare, transport, equivalence of qualifications, funding for residential placements). Some also offer information on the labour market and job hunting. However, they are less likely to provide pre-entry support for developing skills relating to career choice and management (eg self-awareness, information-seeking and decision-making).

Yet these are crucial for making correct choices and effective transitions, and for sustaining employability. Connexions and IAG partnerships in collaboration with colleges may need to ensure that such support is provided when necessary.

Identifying guidance needs

There appears to be an increased emphasis in the sector on screening applications to identify:

- inappropriate course choices
- students who might be 'at risk'
- those who might require specialist advice or more in-depth guidance.

A central admissions team or college careers adviser may screen application forms for mismatches on course choice, and referred candidates may be interviewed by student or client services or student support staff.

Case study

At the Isle of Wight College all applications are checked by the admissions and guidance team, then a decision is taken about whether the student requires a careers interview to clarify career goals or identify suitable options (red channel) or whether they can proceed for an admissions interview (green channel). This screening of application forms has been very effective in identifying guidance needs at this stage.

Case study

High drop out in the first 3 months on programme led Totton College to look more closely at its enrolment and induction procedures. Department heads and team leaders felt that students were sometimes recruited onto the wrong programmes, by a centralised enrolment process that had no formal link to subject specialists. Senior staff were already linked to specific schools, where they delivered talks and interviewed pupils to check enrolments before they were confirmed. These arrangements were retained, but the enrolment process was changed.

All tutors now participate in enrolment and are trained appropriately. In 1999, a new procedure required tutors to refer an applicant to the head of department if there was a query about whether the course was appropriate. The department head would then decide whether or not to accept the applicant, discuss other suitable options and refer on as necessary, although enrolling tutors retained the overview of the student's course. The level of staff satisfaction with the new system increased from 45% to 85%, and student satisfaction remained high (90%). There was a 7% improvement in retention in the college during the first 3 months of programme.

Incorporating access to guidance within admissions

The debate about whether to use centralised, non-teaching or curriculum staff to give pre-enrolment advice and interview has been going on for some time. Survey results indicate that nearly as many institutions are using teaching staff (69%) as guidance and admissions staff (85% and 61%) to provide information and impartial guidance to learners at the pre-entry stage. However, in only 47% of institutions were academic staff receiving training to deliver pre-entry guidance compared to guidance staff in 86% of institutions and admissions staff in 56%. A distinction may be made in colleges between admissions staff who provide information and specialists (eg a careers adviser employed by the college) who deliver guidance. In many cases (60%) pre-entry guidance will also be provided by careers service or Connexions staff. Information and advice is offered by staff with specific responsibilities (eg for welfare, accommodation, finance, HE programmes, schools liaison, language support or additional needs).

A number of colleges have been moving towards central admissions processes or linking the work of specialist staff and academic tutors by:

- joint interviewing, either with student or client services staff and academic staff interviewing together in all or some sessions; or central staff referring on to academic staff where necessary
- involving specialist student guidance staff or senior curriculum managers at some stage in the admissions process if recruitment is undertaken by lecturing staff, either to check on course or subject choices or discuss this with an applicant if the selection appears inappropriate.

Admissions tutors are nominated by heads of school. The emphasis of the training package is that they are interviewing on behalf of their college and must take an impartial view of what is best for the candidate.

Pre-entry guidance and admissions survey 2001

Case study

In 1999, Halton College introduced a strengthened student admissions procedure, which made impartial guidance followed by a curriculum interview available for all full-time applicants. A central admissions team composed of student services staff was established.

It appears that a funding mechanism that rewards retention and achievement encourages:

- a recognition in the sector that it is in all parties' best interest to place applicants correctly
- a more overt institutional commitment to the principles of impartiality and recruitment with integrity.

Case study

A key feature of the applications process at Thomas Rotherham College is the extensive involvement of qualified careers advisory staff, who are employed by the college and interview all students who apply to study there (approximately 1000 per year). This is a very heavy caseload for the two staff concerned, but it is considered worthwhile to increase accuracy and impartiality in programme selection.

Once entered into the system, application forms are passed to the careers advisers, who send separate letters to prospective students and their parents or guardians, inviting them to a consultation, and requesting that the students bring their progress file or Record of Achievement. Pupils may be interviewed either in the college or at feeder schools. Subject familiarisation sessions have been organised for the careers advisers delivering the consultations. If particular issues arise during the consultations, careers advisers can discuss these with subject staff. Any students whose career goals cannot be met within the college can be referred back to the careers service. If there is an indication on the application form that a student has some form of learning difficulty, they will be assessed either on site, at home or in the college with their parents or guardians. Referrals are made as appropriate to the educational psychologist.

Most course staff do not therefore normally meet students before either the induction days and taster events in July or enrolment. (There is, however, a different applications system for Nursery Nursing, in which students are interviewed by subject specialists.)

Feedback, collected on evaluation sheets and focusing on how the session assisted the pupil, has provided useful qualitative data and contributed to service improvement.

The challenge is to ensure that staff (particularly non-teaching staff) recommending placement on particular programmes are adequately informed of curriculum developments, understand the programme content and the skills and abilities needed to succeed. They should also have access to up-to-date and adequately detailed materials.

It was found on one (programming) course with poor retention that 70% of those who dropped out were enrolled during advice and guidance sessions by departmental staff who had no knowledge of programming. This raised many issues such as who staffs advice and guidance sessions, whether factsheets can cover all eventualities and whether all students should be interviewed by specialist staff.

The College of North East London

Increasing consistency in interviewing

Institutions have been taking a range of actions to increase the quality of their interviewing. Respondents to the survey were most likely to identify the following:

- working to the national quality (or service) standards
- training and staff development activities
- ensuring greater consistency in interviewing.

Currently working towards the IAG standards which has helped clarify / review procedures and improve consistency.

Pre-entry guidance and admissions survey 2001

Other examples are listed here.

Selection, briefing, training and appraisal of staff

Some colleges are selecting staff for interviewing, rather than making it a responsibility of all teaching staff. For example, heads of department might nominate admissions tutors for their faculty. They are typically formed into a small team, which can be trained and updated more easily.

Case study

At Richmond upon Thames College interviewers from the course teams are selected by the head of department and attend fairly extensive training, including developing interviewing skills. Interviews are conducted at the college: the reception facilities and the waiting areas are welcoming. Staff use a course manual and interview pack with a checklist on the topics to cover as appropriate (eg ease of travel, overseas student status, suitability for programme area). Interview weeks are agreed with the borough schools to minimise disruption.

Several colleges indicated that where staff competence in interviewing was included in staff roles, it was being assessed in appraisals. The national quality standards require supervision and appraisal of competence against the national (CAMPAG) occupational standards for guidance and advice.

Nearly 10% of colleges indicated that they were undertaking observations of interviews. This might include peer assessment and arises in part from the introduction of observations of teaching and learning as part of quality assurance arrangements and the requirements in the national quality standards. Institutions reported that their staff were either already qualified or working towards recognised qualifications.

Colleges are also providing verbal or written briefings or guidelines to admissions staff and interviewers, or all staff involved in talks or interviews. Curriculum areas may be required to provide updates (eg on entry requirements, programme content, progression and destination data) or information on course and curriculum changes. Documents, such as factsheets, may be available to interviewers for reference.

Staff may be required to work within an agreed code of practice like the Guidance Council's *Code of principles* or the Institute of Career Guidance's *Code of ethics*.

Policy and procedures

Some colleges have an overarching cross-college policy and agreed procedures, which might include agreed quality standards covering admissions interviews.

Improved recording and monitoring of interviews

Interview checklists and guidelines covering key aspects of a programme are being used in interviews to ensure that all necessary areas are addressed. Staff may be required to complete standard forms (eg identifying outcomes) or action plans; a sample of which can subsequently be checked to ensure regular completion and consistent approaches. Two-thirds of colleges keep records of referrals to other providers, to ensure that an impartial approach is being taken.

A pre-entry interview sheet articulates/clarifies topics to be covered. This is signed by both the guidance agent and the client. Monitoring is completed through a process of service quality review for admissions.

Pre-entry guidance and admissions survey 2001

Case study

Most students applying to Solihull Sixth Form College have already been interviewed by the careers service in Solihull, so they have some awareness of their career goals. They (with their parents) are then interviewed in partner schools by a senior member of the academic staff. There are comprehensive notes for interviewing, including procedures which need to be followed, the requirements of the programme, possible subject combinations and criteria for acceptance. This helps to ensure that impartial advice is given and that pupils are clear about what the college can and cannot offer. An interview record is produced for each student, and pupils are advised within 10 days whether they have been accepted: if refused they can appeal to the principal.

The inadequate monitoring of student support activities in general within colleges was commonly identified as a weakness by FEFC inspectors, and institutions have been addressing this through:

- client feedback, such as that gained from satisfaction questionnaires completed by potential students (and sometimes their parents) and focus groups
- data specifying the extent to which retention and achievement targets have been met, and data from internal and external inspection and self-assessment reports and quality audits
- following up students who withdraw.

A questionnaire, which includes evaluation of their interview(s), is attached to the offer letter and returned to the college with acceptance of a place slip.

Pre-entry guidance and admissions survey 2001

Case study

At Bracknell and Wokingham College, applicants are interviewed by a member of student services staff and a tutor. The college has been focusing on increasing consistency in admissions interviews by:

- *issuing guidelines on delivering interviews to tutors, including the standards expected*
- *training all tutors in interviewing*

- *introducing a common framework of questions. This ensures that data, for example on additional learning support (ALS) needs, levels of career awareness and options considered, is collected for all students. Tutors need to tick boxes as a check that everything has been covered. Students sign the completed document, but do not retain a copy*
- *using the information system to identify successful interviewing styles.*

Providing guidance to adults

Institutions may hold specific pre-entry open days or evenings for prospective mature learners as well as inviting them to taster days. They can then deliver advice sessions covering topics such as finance and childcare, as commended by inspectors. Adults also need to have their previous experience recognised and accredited. Lack of provision or low take-up of accreditation of prior learning (APL) or prior experiential learning (APEL) were features of student support provision in colleges achieving grade 3 or below, and frequently criticised by the inspectorate.

Case study

Bracknell and Wokingham College has many adult learners on A-level courses; women returners and Access to IT programmes. Concern at the lack of understanding these students had of the financial implications of returning to learning has led the college to introduce a new approach, whereby 19+ learners are interviewed both by subject staff and the student services team. The latter concentrates on managing finances (eg covering the impact on benefits, additional costs and any financial assistance available).

Increasing vocational awareness through tasters

Tasters and introductory programmes were frequently commended by the inspectorate as providing a valuable insight into subjects or programmes. They can reduce withdrawal from programmes by raising career awareness, and confirming or challenging choices. Tasters are particularly important for adults, for whom there are often major financial implications in retraining, and who therefore need to be sure that they are making the right choice before starting longer programmes.

Case study

At Skelmersdale College, tasters are arranged for Year 10 students who attend for a day and work in groups of 10, with a mentor (staff or student). They undertake a range of activities, which introduce them to the facilities and resources offered by the college. Tokens and a prize are awarded for good behaviour.

Case study

Leeds College of Building has introduced the following changes pre-entry and at entry to ensure that students are committed to construction as a career and to increase retention:

- *a 6-week Foundation course, targeted at 16-year-old students on craft programmes to enable them to sample skills areas and check their suitability for the industry. This is being extended to cover all students interested in training at craft level, including adults*
- *a 6-week summer school taster for those interested in sampling craft areas or those applying to start programmes in the autumn. The school is voluntary and the college has used Access funds to support those attending. Participants can spend 2 weeks in three craft areas with integrated Key Skills and Basic Skills support linked to extensive IT provision.*

Ensuring better informed parents and guardians

Parents' and guardians' understanding of further education, the programmes offered and progression routes will be affected by several factors, including:

- their own experience of education, including the level they reached
- the experience of their family and friends
- portrayal in the media.

Much of this knowledge may not be current or accurate. In particular, lack of understanding among parents about curriculum changes may reinforce a preference for academic programmes over vocational routes. Depending on the nature of the catchment area, many parents may not have studied in further or higher education. Given the importance of correct course placement for ensuring retention and achievement – and the influence exerted by many parents (Martinez, Munday 1998) – it is vital that they are adequately briefed on the range of provision and progression routes. Information and advice are provided to parents through:

- leaflets about the college and what it can offer
- invitations to school pupils and their parents to information evenings
- parents' handbooks or handbooks targeted at both students and parents (for example, Tamworth and Litchfield College has produced a course handbook for each vocational area highlighting both programme content and assessment procedures)
- leaflets or booklets about the curriculum (eg Curriculum 2000).

Approaches to parents need to take account of the nature of the local population, including, for example, ethnic composition and social mix. Colleges should also bear in mind that parents are potential learners. The commitment of the parent to the institution as a student may also encourage their child to achieve.

Depending on the programmes offered, more creative ways may used to encourage the more reluctant parents into institutions by introducing sessions of interest to them as part of parents' evening (eg 'how to fix your car' or 'how to find your three most useful websites').

Case study

Wigston College produces a parents' handbook which provides answers to questions parents typically ask, includes the students' charter and gives details of students' responsibilities and enrichment activities.

There has also been a greater focus in colleges on developing ongoing relationships with parents, because they have recognised that:

- 16-year-old school leavers may not be independent learners; many need to work within a framework of discipline and support (both at college and, if possible, at home) if they are to develop the skills to work independently
- harnessing the contribution and support of parents can help retain young people on programmes and help them achieve.

Closer attendance monitoring and follow-up of learners by many colleges as a strategy to improve retention and achievement, is bringing increased contact with parents of younger learners. Institutions have moved their first parents' evenings for new students back to the autumn term, reflecting the importance of briefing parents on the team's expectations, gaining parental commitment and addressing any problems which might affect student progress at an early stage. At Wigston College, for example, parents of first-year students now meet tutorial staff through parents' consultations / parents' evening in October, rather than in February.

Case study

At Bracknell and Wokingham College, personal tutors contact the parents of full-time students by telephone at the beginning of term to introduce themselves and the support they offer, including absence monitoring. Parents who cannot be contacted by phone receive a standard letter.

Conclusion

Institutions have been reviewing their policies, procedures and practice in the delivery of pre-entry information, advice and guidance, particularly as a result of inspection, the focusing agenda, research into retention and achievement and meeting the national quality standards. Many innovations have been introduced into the delivery and monitoring of services. Colleges use retention and achievement data and client feedback more frequently to inform changes to the pre-entry information, advice and guidance. There is still much to do, but the quality of course information and the impartiality and consistency of interviewing are improving.

The findings from this study suggests that applicants could be more appropriately placed on programmes if colleges:

- use feedback from those applying to the institution – both those who enrol and those who do not – and from parents and teachers in schools (where appropriate) to inform changes to the information, advice and guidance provided at pre-entry and entry stages
- explore any effects of pre-entry information, advice and guidance on retention and achievement – particularly where there is early withdrawal
- liaise with schools and the Connexions service to clarify the nature and extent of careers education and guidance received by pupils. Review existing IAG provision, and innovate to ensure that applicants make realistic programme choices
- identify the information needs of parents and guardians within the college catchment area – and develop appropriate ways of meeting these
- explore ways of increasing access to advice and guidance at times of greatest need (eg after GCSE results are announced)
- develop self-assessment tools, particularly for part-time provision, to enable prospective students to identify the most appropriate programme and level
- ensure that effective screening processes are in place in the admissions process to identify those making inappropriate programme choices and refer them for advice and guidance to explore other options
- ensure that whoever is interviewing for course placement – admissions, guidance or teaching staff – is thoroughly briefed about all aspects of the programme
- wherever possible offer the opportunity for realistic tasters so that applicants can experience what their choice entails before final commitment
- monitor provision to ensure that policies, systems and procedures are followed consistently by staff.

Appendix

Pre-enrolment services: tensions and conflicts

Commitment to open access	versus	Poor student outcomes
Strict entry criteria	versus	Pressures to put 'bums on seats'
Student or parental perceptions of best choice of course	versus	College perceptions of best choice of course
Desire to maintain contact with students following application or other initial enquiry or application	versus	Resource constraints
Impartial information and advice	versus	Need to recruit students to a particular course
Teacher management of pre-enrolment processes	versus	Centralised and standardised advice and guidance services
Creation of universal student entitlement	versus	Creation of differential entitlement by mode of attendance or type of student
Specialisation of functions and systems creating a complex pathway	versus	Creation of transparent and simple student pathway
Monitoring and evaluation of pre-enrolment services	versus	Difficulties around systematic information gathering and monitoring

This is taken from Page 23 of *Improving student retention: a guide to successful strategies* by Paul Martinez (FEDA 1997).

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About the author

Jackie Sadler has worked in a range of guidance settings, including schools, the careers service and a college-based adult guidance service. Over the past 12 years she has undertaken a range of development, evaluation and research work, making a particular contribution to developing national quality standards and identifying the European dimension of guidance. She currently convenes the Student Guidance Network for the Raising Quality and Achievement Programme.

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Pre-entry information, advice and guidance are crucial to helping learners choose the right programme of study. Focusing on FE and sixth colleges, and community education this report provides a snapshot of current practice in the post-16 sector highlighting strengths and weaknesses.

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